

Dr Chapman's lecture certainly lived up to this intriguing title. His wide ranging talk provided a fascinating insight into the history of the development of birth control in the western world.

He took us through several centuries of peoples' attempts to manage both family and population size, showing us more than 40 people that have been involved in the ideas and implementation of birth control techniques. Examples he produced ranged from the bizarre suggestions of Rhazes, a famed 9th Century physician to more modern proponents of birth control. Rhazes recommended that after intercourse the woman should stand up and jump backwards 5 times to prevent conception while the work of the all important feminine visionaries Marie Stopes in Britain and Margaret Sanger in the USA in the late 19th Century enabled the establishment of the first birth control clinics.

With very little scientific information available until recently, recommendations for promoting fertility or controlling it abounded including the use of crocodile and/or elephant dung as pessaries, the use of spider intestines worn on the left arm in leather pouches and blowing into the mouth of a tree frog! After this we had McFadden's theories in 1935 on the role of acidity and alkalinity in determining the sex of the unborn baby. We now know that McFadden's claims that male babies are conceived in an alkaline environment (pH >7) and female ones in an acid one (pH <7) are untenable.

In addition we heard about the introduction of innovative fertility control objects such as the chastity belt, the vaginal sponge and the various forerunners of the modern day condom.

By contrast, and with some relief, the audience was introduced to less bizarre ideas relating to the use of various plant or herbal extracts such as Dr Patterson's Pennyroyal (*Mentha pulegium*) pills in 1900. Less than 100 years later in 1951 the prize winning chemist Carl Djerrasi synthesised a stable, active oral contraceptive pill based on norethindrone, and changed women's lives forever.